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SUBJECT: MEDIA PLAY: President Kumaratunga dissolves
Parliament

1. (U) Summary. On February 7, President Kumaratunga dissolved Sri Lanka's Parliament. Newspaper reporting was partisan, particularly in government-owned (and Kumaratunga-controlled) media outlets. The independent press carried Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and his UNP party's story, as well as more nuanced reporting about the President's decision. Newspaper headlines reported concern for free and fair elections from both the President's and the Prime Minister's perspectives; not surprisingly the media has begun covering newly campaigning parties. Media reports showed Tamil and Muslim political parties already in the fray. Concern about the economy and donor money for development also dominated media headlines, particularly in the Tamil press. Editorial comment was heavy in both government-owned and independent newspapers, although each camp offered wildly divergent opinions. Government-owned newspapers in all languages reflected the President's agenda, reiterating that her decision to dissolve Parliament was the right decision, because, as one editor wrote (2/9), "If she waited any longer the nation would have totally collapsed." Independent commentary in all languages was critical of the President's actions and focused on elections. One independent Sinhala editor commanded, (2/9) "Now all should pay attention to a free and fair election," while a Tamil commentator cautioned, "The fresh elections should not be a barrier for peace..." End summary.

2. (U) On February 7, President Kumaratunga dissolved Sri Lanka's Parliament. In the days after, most newspaper headlines echoed independent Sinhala daily DIVAINA's lead (2/9), "Parliament dissolved, elections on April 2; Nominations from February 17-24; new parliament to meet on April 22." Newspaper reporting in (Kumaratunga-controlled) government-owned and independent media quickly became partisan. Government-owned English DAILY NEWS headlined (2/9), "Country saved from anarchy," while its vernacular sibling government-owned Sinhala daily DINAMINA crowed (2/9), "People celebrate government dissolution," and government-owned Tamil daily THINAKARAN noted (2/9), "Country welcomes the dissolution of the parliament." Reporting about the President's decision from non-government media sources was more nuanced. Independent English website LANKA ACADEMIC headlined (2/8), "President was 'forced' to dissolve parliament by her party stalwarts." Pro-LTTE website TAMILNET noted (2/7), "President intervened to save nation from Premier's anti national sabotage - Opposition Leader." Independent Tamil daily THINAKKURAL lead with (2/9), "The President expects the stalled political situation to change with the elections."

3. (U) The independent press carried Prime Minister Wickremesinghe and his UNP party's story. Independent English weekly SUNDAY TIMES headlined (2/8), "Panic decision: PM," while it's daily sister Independent English DAILY MIRROR continued (2/9), "Dissolution dictatorial: UNP." Independent Maharajah Television (MTV) reported in all languages (2/8), "The UNP says an unnecessary election will have a negative impact on peace development." Independent Tamil newspaper coverage was especially supportive of the UNP message. Independent Tamil daily THINAKKURAL reported (2/9), "Dissolution of the parliament is a signal of war from the south - UNP," while independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI's main headline (2/9) read, "We will win the elections and form a stronger government and teach a good lesson to the President - UNP."

4. (U) In the meantime, independent English daily ISLAND reported on the composition of the government before the elections (2/9), "Caretaker govt. cabinet of 15 ministers," while independent English DAILY MIRROR asked (2/9), "More Cabinet heads to roll?" The President appointed two of her closest advisors to the caretaker cabinet. Government-owned English DAILY NEWS' photo lead was captioned (2/9), "Two new ministers," (Media Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar; Post and Telecommunications Minister D. M. Jayaratne). The President's newly appointed ministers quickly found their voices. Independent English website LANKA ACADEMIC reported the new Media Minister's comments (2/9), "My goal is a well balanced media- Kadirgamar," while independent

Sinhala daily LAKBIMA did the same for the new Post and Telecommunications Minister (2/9), "Government failed to address people's issues - D. M. Jayaratne."

15. (U) Newspaper headlines reported concern for free and fair elections from both the President's and the Prime Minister's perspectives. Independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI noted (2/9), "The President will give orders to conduct a free and fair election - New Minister Kadirgamar," while independent English daily ISLAND reported Power and Energy Minister Karu Jayasuriya's comments (2/9), "Karu stresses need for violence free polls, calls for foreign monitors." Newspapers gave space to coverage of local election monitors as well. Independent English DAILY MIRROR wrote (2/9), "PAFFREL swings into action," (People's Action for Free and Fair Elections), while independent Tamil daily THINAKKURAL continued (2/9), "PAFFREL to deploy 20,000 local observers at the general election."

16. (U) Not surprisingly, campaigning in the media has begun. Independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI reported (2/9), "Political parties are seriously engaged in setting their strategies for the general elections - UNP meets under PM - TNA to meet tomorrow." Independent English website LANKA ACADEMIC reported UNP chairman Malik Samarwickrema's comments (2/8), "UNP Confident of Winning Elections-Malik," while independent Sinhala daily DIVAINA continued the UNP line (2/9), "Will get people's mandate to let people-friendly program win - UNP Deputy Leader Karu Jayasuriya." Government-owned Sinhala daily DINAMINA's headline dismissed UNP optimism (2/9), "Even though we'll lose this election, we'll win next time, says Rajitha," (Minister of Lands Rajitha Senaratne); and went further still (2/9), "Group of UNPers ask for a new leader for UNP."

17. (U) Although independent English DAILY MIRROR reported (2/9), "Minority groups still on the fence," media headlines showed Tamil and Muslim political parties already in the fray. Pro-LTTE Tamil daily SUDAR OLI led with (2/9), "TNA to adopt a new strategy at the general elections - no preferential votes," even though independent Tamil daily THINAKKURAL cautioned (2/9), "Today there are no Sinhala leaders who think that there should be solution to the Tamils' problems - Elections will further aggravate the situation - TNA Secretary General Sampanthan MP." THINAKKURAL also reported (2/9), "Upcountry Peoples' Front trying hard to get all Tamil parties to contest under one banner," while pro-LTTE Tamil daily SUDAR OLI added (2/9), "Some of the upcountry Tamil parties to join the UNF." The LTTE's reaction was muted. Pro-LTTE website TAMILNET reported (2/8), "LTTE blames Sinhala leaders for lack of political will and vision," and government-owned Tamil daily THINAKARAN noted (2/9), "Government that can grant the Tamils a permanent solution is needed - Vavuniya LTTE leader S. Elilan." On the Muslim front, government-owned Tamil daily THINAKARAN reported, "SLMC is ready to face the elections - Minister Hakeem," while independent English daily ISLAND added (2/9), "SLMC says Muslims should unite," and "SLMC to go it alone."

18. (U) Concern about the economy and donor money for development also dominated media headlines, particularly in the Tamil press. Independent Tamil daily THINAKKURAL cautioned (2/9), "Further fall in finance market expected." Independent English DAILY MIRROR's Financial Times section headlined (2/9), "'Dissolution unnecessary' echo business leaders - Cohabitation would have seen the nation through; Urge next Govt to ensure stability and development oriented economy while ensuring peace process." Government-owned Tamil daily THINAKARAN noted (2/9), "The development work will come to a standstill with the dissolution of parliament - Minister Karu Jayasuriya." Independent English daily ISLAND reported (2/9), "Crisis puts donor confab in balance," while independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI worried (2/9), "Snap elections would delay USD 4.5 billion aid - Diplomats and intellectuals."

19. (U) Editorial comment was heavy in both government-owned and independent newspapers, although each camp offered wildly divergent opinions. Government-owned newspapers in all languages reflected the President's agenda, reiterating that her decision to dissolve Parliament was the right decision, because, as one editor wrote (2/9), "If she waited any longer the nation would have totally collapsed." Government-owned papers noted that the President had "no choice," and commented on the "dangerous situation [Sri Lanka] was pushed into by the UNF trying to satisfy the developed nations," and stressed elections as the "first step toward an independent Sri Lanka." Independent commentary in all languages was critical of the President's actions. English commentary focused on free and fair elections and the importance of international monitoring and the role of the media. Independent Sinhala editors fretted over the upcoming election and commanded, (2/9) "Now all should pay attention

to a free and fair election," while Tamil commentators characterized the President's actions as a "wrong act" and "undemocratic," and cautioned, "The fresh elections should not be a barrier for peace..."

----- Under the headline, "The right decision, " government-owned English DAILY NEWS commented (2/9), "With the country facing near-anarchy due to a breakdown in governance... Providentially, the people have now been given a chance to decide as to who is best suited to rule this country and restore peace and stability."

Editorial excerpts.

With the country facing near-anarchy due to a breakdown in governance, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga has had no alternative but to dissolve Parliament. The collapse of the peace process and the Shylock-like irrational demand for the portfolio of defence, widespread worker unrest for reasons ranging from low wages, a spiralling cost of living to insecurity of employment, rampant corruption at levels hitherto unheard of, the prohibitive cost of fertiliser to farmers, incompetence, inefficiency, thuggery, a trail of broken promises to the people and a total disinterest in the rule of law made the Ranil Wickremesinghe-led United National Front (UNF) government's continuance in office untenable.. Providentially, the people have now been given a chance to decide as to who is best suited to rule this country and restore peace and stability.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "Dissolution of parliament," government-owned Tamil daily THINAKARAN commented (2/9), "The President had no other options than to dissolve the parliament as the UNF government was inactive.. So, the decision taken by the President to dissolve the parliament is correct."

Editorial excerpts.

The parliament has been dissolved and fresh polls are to be held on April 2nd.. The President had no other options than to dissolve the parliament as the UNF government was inactive.. The UNF ministers, who challenged the President to hold fresh elections suddenly became silent because a survey conducted by the UNP sources showed a negative result.. All UNF strategies to postpone the dissolution of the parliament failed.. Certain political analysts, patriotic artistes and many trade union leaders requested the President not to fall prey to the UNF ploy, as they realized the dangerous situation that the country was pushed into by the UNF in trying to satisfy the developed nations.. It is the duty of the President to give an opportunity to the citizens to decide the fate of an inactive government. So, the decision taken by the President to dissolve the parliament is correct.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "Save the country from politicians," independent English DAILY MIRROR commented (2/9), "...We humbly call on the international community to play a bigger role in the monitoring of this next election from north to south and east to west. Otherwise our vile political morons will further plunge this country with so much promise into eternal chaos."

Editorial excerpts.

Now that President Chandrika Kumaratunga has dissolved Parliament and fixed fresh elections, the third in four years, on April 02, what is of utmost necessity is a free and fair election without senseless bloodletting.. One thing is certain. Virtually all politicians are in this foray not for the country, but for their own aggrandisement.. Therefore, more than ever, we need a free and fair election to really feel the pulse of the nation. All recent elections have been marred by violence perpetrated by none other than these so-called democratic parties. So once again, knowing our politicians, we humbly call on the international community to play a bigger role in the monitoring of this next election from north to south and east to west. Otherwise our vile political morons will further plunge this country with so much promise into eternal chaos.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "Is dissolution of parliament a wise decision?" independent Sinhala daily LANKADEEPA commented (2/9), "Who can justify the dissolution of a government that had the majority in the Parliament? Isn't this act ridiculing the people's mandate? If this election also brings a government of this nature, are going to have eternal elections?Now all should pay attention to a

free and fair election."

Editorial excerpts.

The step to dissolve parliament and hold a general election can never be regarded as prudent. Why? This is not the time for the Sri Lankan sectors to be at loggerheads. The rectifying of bitter political instability that arose since November 4 was crucial. Another crucial factor is the country's poor economic instability. Conflicts in the economic and trade areas with the upcoming election is inevitable. Investments will be low, foreign aid will be scarce. For years, the majority of the people have been suffering. Who can justify the dissolution of a government that had the majority in the Parliament? Isn't this act ridiculing the people's mandate? If this election also brings a government of this nature, are going to have eternal elections? This dissolution has happened at a time when the peace process has halted. What will happen to the peace process? Who can give the guarantee that a war will not occur? What will happen if it happens? Whatever it is, the bad has already happened. Now all should pay attention to a free and fair election. This won't be possible if violence and rigging continues. Who would then be penalized? The public.

End editorial excerpts.

----- Under the headline, "General Election and the national problem," independent Tamil daily VIRAKESARI commented (2/9), "The fresh elections should not be a barrier for peace and the new elected government should take forward the peace process or else the country will face economic hardships."

Editorial excerpts.

After consulting some of SLFP stalwarts and the Elections Commissioner, the President dissolved the parliament using her executive powers.. The President has also appointed two of her closest allies as Ministers in the caretaker government.. Snap polls were expected but not so soon, judging from the President's address at independence celebrations.. As in the past, where her views and promises never lasted, here too, her stand has changed immediately.. The national problem during the last two decades was the ethnic problem.. That is the cause of all the destruction.. During PM Ranil Wickremasinghe's short spell as the PM, a lot of effort was taken to solve this problem.. The fresh elections should not be a barrier for peace and the new elected government should take forward the peace process or else the country will face economic hardships..

End editorial excerpts.

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